

RUBBING MALT ON THE WOUND

The strange world of Scottish whiskey forms the backdrop for Doug Johnstone's fast-paced new crime novel. He explains why he has developed an aversion to fiction that is clever for its own sake and why the UK publishing industry is stacked against Scottish writers WORDS **Peter Murphy**



Musician, journalist and novelist Doug Johnstone's third novel, *Smokeheads*, is one of the flagship books on Faber's 2011 thriller list. Touted as the missing link between *Sideways* and *The Wicker Man*, it's the high-octane tale of four 30-something gadabouts who embark on a whiskey tasting sortie to the island of Islay in the Inner Hebrides, and find themselves embroiled in a local police bootlegging conspiracy that culminates in multiple murders and exploding distilleries. Spicing chemical generation disaffection with Rankin-type tartan noir in all too familiar sub-zero temperatures, it's a three-hour read.

"I've been drifting towards that more and more," Johnstone says. "For years I've done book reviews and interviewed novelists, and over the years I've had less time for big books or complicated books: just keep it short and let me be able to read it and be entertained. It's the idea of storytelling above all. Don't get me wrong, I like a beautifully constructed sentence as much as the next literary fan, but something's got to happen – like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*."

At least two of the book's protagonists are self-styled single malt snobs. Presumably Johnstone's research into Islay's biggest export was more pleasurable than your average thriller writer's trawl through state pathologists' offices?

"I've always been a fan of whiskies, specifically the Islay ones," he admits. "I did actually join the Scottish Malt Whiskey Society for a year, which was quite expensive and a bit up itself, but I joined anyway just to get some of these single cask things that you can't get anywhere else. Not cheap, but good research! And I went back to Islay for a little tour, a long weekend, which was fairly messy. It's a huge money-spinner, the whiskey industry, an unbeliev-

able amount of time and money goes into the whole thing, and gets made by it. There are millions of these middle-aged men trying to get one up on each other about whiskey tasting. I don't really have the palate for it, although I could tell you an Islay malt from a non-Islay one. I think that world is really funny. Iain Banks had an interesting book about it, it was like the Holy Grail, in search of the perfect malt, and of course he never finds it, but he has a good time trying. There is an element of the quest. It gets back to that Nick Hornby blokes thing, the infantile making of lists, the collecting. Boys seem to be a bit more OCD about that than girls."

And, of course, there's the location. Island life has fascinated writers for centuries, from Victorian romances up to *Lost*.

"I'm semi-obsessed with that," Johnstone concedes. "There's something fascinating about an enclosed society, it's kind of mesmerising. They all have a certain atmosphere about them. *The Wicker Man* constantly springs to mind for people my generation, that sort of, 'We don't like strangers round these parts' thing. It might come down to something as simple as the geography of islands – which mirror the isolated mindset. And it's a great idea if you're going to write something that's got a thriller-ish bent about it. That's your closed room in the Agatha Christie style, you've got your set number of people, and there's no escape."

"Islay is a particularly strange place," he continues. "They make billions of pounds from these eight or nine distilleries. About a hundred people make that money. Nine people run Laphroaig, there's a day shift and a night shift and about four or five on each. More people work in the gift shop than actually make the whiskey. And of course all that money goes to what ever Italian or Japanese multinational that owns it. But the place is absolutely not geared up for tourism. It's a strange throwback. There are three pubs on the island. It's not like they haven't cottoned on, they're just not arsed, they're quite happy making the money. They don't need to make any more. But that area seems to be relatively unfavoured in fiction and even non-fiction. Scottish fiction tends to be further out, the Outer Hebrides or whatever. But from Laphroaig

you can see Northern Ireland across the water. It's a bit of a mindfuck when you first realise that."

Johnstone's previous novels *Tombstoning* and *The Ossians* were published by Penguin. Why the move to Faber?

"*Smokeheads* is not a huge departure from what I've written before, but I think Faber are sort of punting it as being much more genre-orientated. The truth is it's not that big a leap from *Tombstoning* and *The Ossians*, which had elements of thriller about them as well, but I discovered a lot of classic noir stuff around the same time and I wanted to write something in that vein, stripped back and no-nonsense. And we just got together with Angus Cargill at Faber, who was putting together a really interesting crime and thriller list. Sometimes in your career you just make a decision, and you have no idea what you're doing at the time, but it turns out to be a really good one. I didn't really have any complaints about Penguin, but it's such a huge machine. Someone like me writing contemporary fiction set in Scotland about drugs and booze and violence and swearing tends to be at the bottom of the list. You've got Jamie Oliver at the top and Nick Hornby after that."

Does Doug believe there's still a class issue at work in metropolitan publishing circles?

"I think there is. It's really quite a shock for someone like me, or any Scottish writer. When you first go down to London and talk to people,

the publishing industry in London is quite a small world, and these people come from a very different background. They loved Irvine Welsh and they loved Alan Warner and all that stuff, specifically one editor loved them because they sold copies. I don't think their hearts were ever really in it. Their hearts have always been in Martin Amis and the like. And I don't think that's changed."

"I don't know if I need to watch what I say or not, but the vast majority of stuff published by the London industry is of no interest to me whatsoever. I tend to be interested in smaller publishing houses willing to take a chance on new young fiction. I'm reluctant to say there is still a kind of class thing – in Scotland someone like Jim Kelman is always banging that drum about the class divide and a post-colonial racism about Scottish, Irish or Welsh writers in the same way that there is about writers from other ethnic backgrounds. I don't want to go too far down that road, but I do think it's very hard for young Scottish writers to get published. I certainly see that around with other writers I know who are good enough. I guess these things come in trends. People in my generation missed the boat because Irvine Welsh and his ilk were all published in the early 90s, and that's when it was the *cause celebre*, these angry young Scottish voices, and now it's onto something else."

Smokeheads is published by Faber in March

